

The 2016 election needs a class-oriented agenda.

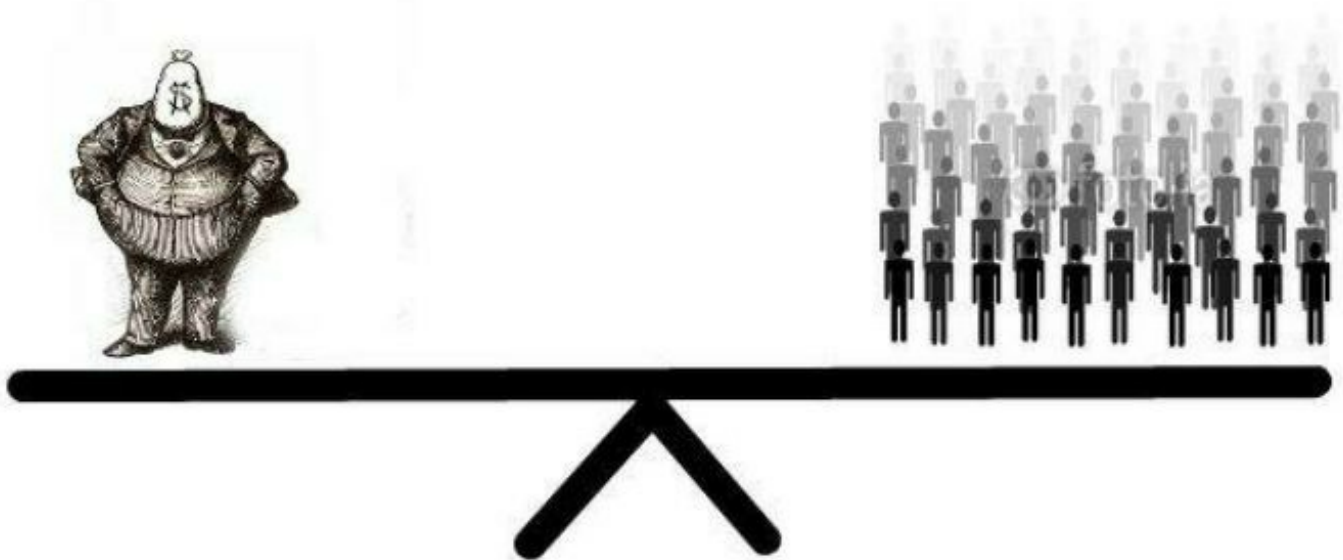
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*Bernie Sanders' popularity in the current presidential campaign has raised the possibility in the minds of many on the left that there could be a broader electoral movement of activists with a class-based agenda. **Stephen Amberg** writes that while President Obama has pursued some class-based policies, his ability to promote change has been largely limited by Congress to administrative actions. Looking ahead, he writes that by supporting Congressional and state legislative candidates who are committed to this agenda, Sanders and those like him may help to turn the Democratic Party's focus towards a more class-oriented agenda.*



The United States has famously class-less politics compared to other western democracies. There is a two-party system institutionalized in first-past-the-post election rules that reinforces a liberal individualist culture. This was always an exaggeration – the imputation to history of a transcendent rule. Some of the most interesting developments in American politics have occurred when a working class politics pokes through the presumptive narrative of liberal consensus in an organized way. Of course the “liberal consensus” is itself a class politics, as E. E. Schattschneider long ago [observed](#) about an earlier turn in US politics. This year's presidential election invites us to consider the possibility that class politics will break through again. Some have called this an anti-capitalist moment, acknowledging the surprising support by young Americans under 30 for socialism in opinion surveys as well as the broader unpopularity of CEO privileges and free trade. By the same token, Andrew Sullivan has [warned](#) that Donald Trump's rise demonstrates the dangers of too much democracy.

It's not just the candidacies of Trump and Bernie Sanders that reveal the potential power of class politics. In fact, Trump is an anti-class politics politician of the usual stripe in many ways: he's an outsider against the professional politicians, but he brags about being an inside player; he's against unions and raising pay; he flaunts his job creation prowess, but his major proposals are to deport immigrant workers and penalize companies that export jobs; and he's the epitome of ruthless capitalist ethics, as suggested by Trump's unaccredited University. Rather, there is the possibility that the Sanders campaign will morph into a broader movement that connects activists who have a class-based agenda with electoral politics. That has been sorely lacking in the United States for a generation.



This broader movement is typically ignored in mainstream coverage, which is already tending to normalize Trump as just another conservative Republican, but the class agenda has been developed over many years by policy experts closely allied with the remnants of organized labor. It has not had legs until now. Its potential has been significantly augmented by Fight for 15 and by many of the groups associated with Latino Dreamers and Black Lives Matter, which are not segregated by race, ethnicity and gender, and who are clearly to the left of the Democratic Party. Already, in several places, these groups have become involved in local and state elections. President Obama was the first president in a generation to openly, on national television, support unions. The labor movement was critical to white working class support for his candidacy in 2008 in states like Pennsylvania, where Obama won 48 percent of the white vote, compared to Mississippi, where Obama won only 11 percent. But since 2010 Obama has faced an obstreperous Republican Party in the Congress.

Therefore, in labor policy, as in other policy areas, including education, the environment, and the fate of the children of illegal immigrants, who are US citizens under the law, Obama acted administratively. The US Department of Labor has adopted several rules that significantly advance the interests of wage workers in non-union settings as well as the interests of white-collar workers who employers have reclassified in recent years as managers to avoid the labor laws. This labor agenda, plus the issues that Sanders has stressed, such as revising the rules of international commerce and finance, is the agenda for a new class justice-oriented Democratic Party that breaks with temporizing neoliberalism.

To carry out the class-oriented agenda in full strength, however, takes more than administrative rule-making and election speeches. It takes legislation. This is a far steeper climb than many of the new progressive activists have attempted. To pass legislation requires votes in the Congress and state legislatures. Until recently Sanders has somewhat blithely stipulated that his ambitious agenda for the future, which also includes national health insurance and free post-secondary education, is a realistic one as long as there is a huge voting upsurge. But in recent weeks he's shifted to a more plausible strategy; namely, he is endorsing candidates in state legislative and Congressional races who are committed to this agenda. This strategy has been advocated by his earliest endorsers in the [Working Families Party](#), based in New York and now spreading into a dozen states. The surprising success of the WFP in New York is an illustration of the limits of the standard narrative of US liberal consensus. New York has multi-party politics because, in part, it plays by fusion rules rather than plurality. Its goal and now perhaps Sanders' is to establish an electoral left within the Democratic Party. Along the same lines, recent steps have been made to share the seats on the Democratic Party's convention platform committee between Sanders and Clinton supporters. Although it's commonly observed that US party platforms have been ignored by candidates in recent election cycles, the platform-writing process this year may have more significance than in many decades just because Sanders has made this an issue for his millions of supporters. Though election experts like to focus on aggregation, the reformers are focusing on conversion and mobilization. The platform debate is part of the deliberation over what kind of party the Democratic Party can be.

Sanders has been openly critical of how Obama's 2008 campaign organization failed to sustain a movement and he seems determined to keep the pressure on Democratic leaders. Clinton needs Sanders' voters in November to defeat Trump, who has shown repeatedly that he can outperform expectations. What to watch for after the Democratic platform is written is how the candidates from Clinton to the down-ballot Democrats prioritize their campaign themes. Clinton is comfortable with the modest administrative strategy of Obama (and her husband's administration), but it is widely observed that that approach presents a status quo image that is simply inadequate in the face of Trump's outsider movement. She needs the radical edge of class justice to inspire their support, but she may not be up to the task of carrying this message to blue and white collar voters.

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